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ABSTRACT

More research is needed to explore the ways in which education reform can be considered an international as opposed to a national phenomenon. To meet this need, an examination of the language of recent large-scale education reform in Canada, Great Britain, New Zealand, and the United States is presented. The research looks at the main official documents outlining proposed reforms and at the words of the politicians responsible for introducing those reforms into legislation. The focus is on the similarities and differences between jurisdictions and in the overall nature of official discourse. The text extends the discussion on language and ideology by using a particular set of official documents and pronouncements about purposes and strategies to undergird discussions of the language of reform. The study hinges on two questions: (1) What is the extent to which these various reform programs can be seen as sharing a common language and possibly a common way of thinking as reflected in that language? and (2) What is the role of official discourse in education reform? It was found that at a general level there are many commonalities in the symbolic language used in each country. However, significant differences in the official language of education reform were also evident. (Contains 20 references.) (RJM)

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The Rhetoric of Education Reform

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The Rhetoric of Educational Reform [1]

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Introduction

This paper is an examination of the language of recent large-scale education reform in four settings in three countries. It is part of a larger study of international education reform, which is described more fully below. In two earlier papers (Levin & Young, 1997, 1998) we have raised questions about the extent to which reforms in the different jurisdictions we are studying can usefully be said to be 'of a piece' and also about the role of ideology in shaping reform programs, viewed both nationally and internationally. In this paper we take a narrower focus, looking at the main official documents outlining proposed reforms and at the words of the politicians responsible for introducing those reforms into legislation. We are interested in both the similarities and differences between jurisdictions, and in the overall nature of official discourse. Much of the literature on education reform does give attention to language and to ideology; this paper extends that discussion by using to a particular set of official documents and pronouncements about purposes and strategies as the basis for a discussion of the language of reform.

Our interest in this exercise is spurred by our reading of the growing literature on education reform in an international context, and also by differing conceptions of the role of language in political processes. Before reviewing our own method and data, we review some of the conceptual literature that has influenced our thinking on these questions.

Theoretical framework

The literature that looks at education reform across national jurisdictions embodies contradictory positions on the extent to which reform has been driven by a relatively coherent political and ideological agenda. On the one hand, a number of analysts have drawn attention to important similarities in reforms across jurisdictions, noting especially the powerful influence of what is often referred to as 'New Right' ideas (e.g. Vincent, 1996; Marshall & Peters, 1990, Willis, 1992; Woods & Wenham, 1995). Reforms in countries such as the United Kingdom or New Zealand are also often characterized as being 'New Right', 'neo-conservative', or 'neo-liberal' (e g Ball, 1990; Lawton, 1994; Carl, 1994).

At the same time, most commentators also point to the important differences in the substance and process of reform in different settings, such that reforms that appear similar on the surface are actually quite different from each other in intent as well as in practice (Deem, Brehony & Heath, 1995; Dale & Ozga, 1993; Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995). There is also acknowledgement of the degree to which even within a setting which seems to have had a relatively consistent stance on education reform, government policies and actions have had to accommodate to important tensions within ruling political parties. This has been especially well described for England and Wales by Ball (1990) and by Lawton (1994).

Accordingly, it appears that there is more work to be done to explore the ways in which education reform can usefully be considered an international as opposed to primarily a national (or provincial, in the case of federal states) phenomenon. That is one element of the discussion in this paper.

Also important in our thinking is a range of work in political theory all of which takes the view that politics should be understood as being as much as a symbolic activity as a practical

one. In other words, political talk and action are intended to shape and to respond to people's ideas as much as to their practical interests. The literature on this point is quite substantial, but perhaps the best known writer in this area is Murray Edelman. In two books, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964) and *Constructing the Political Spectacle* (1988), Edelman develops the idea of politics as being largely a symbolic activity in which actions are intended to have psychological consequences.

> Practically every political act that is controversial or regarded as really important is bound to serve in part as a condensation symbol. It evokes a quiescent or an aroused mass response because it symbolizes a threat or reassurance. Because the meaning of the act in these cases depends only partly or not at all upon its objective consequences, which the mass public cannot know, the meaning can only come from the psychological needs of the respondents; and it can only be known from their responses. (1964, 7)

In his second book Edelman puts the issue even more starkly.

> Accounts of political issues...become devices for creating disparate assumptions and beliefs about the social and political world rather than factual statements. The very concept of 'fact' becomes irrelevant because every meaningful political object and person is an interpretation that reflects and perpetuates an ideology. Taken together, they comprise...a meaning machine; a generator of points of view and therefore of perceptions, anxieties, aspirations and strategies. (1988, 10)

In this view of politics, words and other symbolic activities are of critical importance, but not in any straightforward sense. Instead, they are designed to achieve emotional and symbolic purposes as much as anything else. "The propagandist whose verbalizations are most intensely embraced is the one who finds a formulation that evokes and synthesizes a large number of the experiences of concern to this audience." (1964, 124). When this is done, language "...is in no sense descriptive, but only evocative" (1964, 125). Specificity of meaning is not necessarily desirable. Key words are intended to be ambiguous as a way of allowing a range of people to project their own feelings and opinions onto what has been said. At the same time, "...the most astutute and effective use of this language style conceals emotional appeal under the guise of defining issues" (1964, 137). Emotion is offically deplored as a means of invoking emotion (such as a sense of self-righteousness). Or, as Edelman put it in his later book, "Ideological argument through a dramaturgy of objective description may be the most common gambit in political language usage." (1988, 115). As Elster (1983) argues, selfishness cannot be advanced directly as grounds for public policy, so it must be cloaked behind other arguments.

Edelman also argues that politicians use symbolic responses as a substitute for dealing with real interests "which permits the organized to pursue their interests effectively" while others are being satisfied with what is largely rhetoric (1964, 40). In other words, the political spectacle is also used to hide policies and actions that do have material advantages for some groups over others.

In symbolic politics, events are used to create legitimations for political actions. As

Edelman puts it, "A crisis, like all news developments, is a creation of the language used to depict it; the appearance of a crisis is a political act, not a recognition of a fact or of a rare situation." (1988, 31).

Similar views on politics have been expressed by a number of other theorists. Deborah Stone, in *Policy Paradox and Political Reason* (1988), argues in a similar vein. Stone describes problem definition as the strategic representation of situations; strategic in shaping a course of action, and representational because the representation of problems necessarily relies on interpretation by both speakers and listeners. Another important aspect of problem representation concerns the attributed causes of problems; Stone distinguishes between explanations of problems that embody mechanical, intentional, inadvertent or accidental causes as being most important (149). However in politics accident is less and less acceptable as an explanation of events people don't like (Boven & t'Hart, 1994). As the lawyer in the recent movie *The Sweet Hereafter* says in trying to convince a bereaved parent to sue over an accident in which her son was killed, "There is no such thing as an accident. Someone has to be at fault."

Stone also provides a fascinating discussion of some of the vehicles that are used to create particular representations of problems, including stories (that are told as if they are typical), synechdoche (again assuming that one instance stands for many), metaphors (such as the highly misleading expression about 'throwing money at problems'), and the selective use of data to support a particular point of view. She also stresses the importance of ambiguity in allowing people to see what they need in a given commitment or event, thereby making it possible to build political support or coalitions (1988, 123).

Many other advocates of the same general line of argument could be cited, such as Jon Elster (1983), who describes the ways in which politics creates and transforms, as well as expressing, preferences, Charles Lindblom (1980), who notes the degree to which it has been possible to separate discussion of politics and policies from what appear to be people's substantial material interests, and Ronald Manzer whose historical study of Canadian education policy finds that "political ideas can be studied as causal determinants of public policies, or they can be sutided as constitutive meanings of public policies" (1996, 4).

Finally, we draw attention briefly to an analysis of political ideas that draws on the work of Michel Foucault and the concept of discourses. Stephen Ball has developed these ideas very substantially in his work on British education policy. As Ball puts it,

> Discourses are... about what can be said, and thought, but also about who can speak, when, where and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationships, they constitute both subjectivity and power relations... Meanings thus arise not from language but from institutional practices, from power relations, from social position. (1990, 17-18).

The analysis of discourse, which merits a much fuller discussion that we can give it here, clearly has many elements in common with the ideas of Edelman and others, but is also more overtly focused on power relations and on language as a vehicle not only for expression but also for the elimination or prohibition of expression. This line of work also reminds us that while symbols are important, there are also material realities at play; while 'globalization' or 'accountability' may be used as condensation symbols that evoke emotion, they also point to material practices

that have real effects on people's lives.

Before describing the ways in which these ideas are embodied in our own work, we provide first a description of our overall research project.

Study and method

This paper reports on part of a larger study looking at large-scale education reform in the Canadian provinces of Alberta and Manitoba, England and Wales, New Zealand, and the U S state of Minnesota. This research is organized around four main issues:

- Origins of Policy: What reform proposals were initially proposed by governments? What were the sources of these reform proposals? Where did the ideas originate? What ideas and assumptions about educational reform were contained (explicitly or implicitly) in those proposals?
- Policy Approval: Which reforms were actually codified into law or regulation in each jurisdiction? How were these different from what was initially proposed, and why did changes occur?
- Policy Implementation: What steps were taken to implement the reforms? What policy levers were used and why?
- Policy Effects: What is known about the effects of these reforms on students and learning processes in schools?

The time period for the study is different for each jurisdiction, as shown in the table on the next page. However in all jurisdictions the events on which we focus need to be understood in a larger and longer-term context as well.

In terms of data sources for the overall study, we are using primary materials and legislative documents as well as secondary literature. As the study develops we will supplement available materials with additional interviewing, especially in Canada where there is only very limited work already done on these questions. We are also attempting to work closely with other researchers and scholars in the field, sharing ideas and interpretations as well as, wherever possible, data.

Jurisdiction	Time Period	Main Features	Context
England & Wales	primarily 1986-1996; 1979-86 also relevant Most important legislation in 1988 and 1993	-grant maintained schools -individual school governance -funding flows directly to schools - reduction in powers of school districts - reduced scope of collective bargaining - national curriculum - national testing with published results - external inspection; published results - parental choice of schools	Conservative government from 1979-97 with strong emphasis on both neo-conservative and neo-liberal ideas; major reforms in many aspects of society
New Zealand	1987-1995 Key legislation in 1989, 1991	- charter for each school - individual school governance - national curriculum - elimination of school districts - reduction in role of Education Ministry - reduced scope of collective bargaining - national testing - external inspection; published results - parental choice of schools	Labour government from 1987 to 1990; National (conservative) thereafter. Education part of reform in almost all areas of the public sector. Very strong influence of Treasury and neo-liberal economic ideas
Manitoba	1994-1997	- increased provincial testing with public reporting of results - parental choice of schools - more centralized curriculum - larger governance role for parents - reduced scope of collective bargaining - reductions in funding of schools	Conservative government elected in 1988; significant education reforms sponsored by the Minister who took office in 1993. Program of public sector change more muted than in some other provinces
Alberta	1994-1997	- elimination of local financing of education - reduction in number of school districts from 141 to 60; - authorization of charter schools; -increased parental choice of schools - 12% reduction in funding	Conservative government in office many years but elected new leader in 1993 Education change part of a larger program of public sector reductions
Minnesota	1985-87 1991	- parental choice of schools (first state in the US) - student option to attend post-secondary institutions - charter schools introduced (first state in the US)	Minnesota has a liberal political tradition Democratic governor and split legislature in 1985-87 Republican governor and split legislature in 1991

For this particular paper, rather than look at the wider set of arguments around each reform program, we have limited to our analysis to a particular set of data - the main pieces of reform legislation in each setting, any white papers or equivalent documents that laid out such reforms, and the words of key government proponents (typically ministers of education) in introducing legislation. For example, in the U K we draw in this paper on the 1988 Education Reform Act, the initial parliamentary debate around that bill, and in some later documents such as the 1992 White Paper, Diversity and Choice. In Alberta we have used the press releases and government Business Plan produced at the time of the 1994 reform efforts, as well as the Hansard of debate in early 1994. This documentary focus provides a certain degree of consistency in looking at official rhetoric and argument for reform. Because Minnesota does not have a written record of legislative debate, we have omitted the state from the analysis in this paper.

The focus on official statements and documents does not imply that these are a complete or reliable guide to government's motives. As Edelman's analysis points out, government statements may be intended for purposes that are strictly symbolic, or even to disguise real motivations in acceptable language. We also note the degree to which the formal debate in a parliament can have a quite different tone than does the political debate in the community. For example, newspaper coverage of a set of legislative measures may express quite different arguments than those used in the legislature. Different audiences may want and require quite different forms of political argument. We hope to pursue this distinction further in another paper. Nonetheless, speeches in parliament, pieces of legislation and government white papers are the official record and differences among them can help reveal the ways in which education reforms are formed and play out in the different settings.

In looking at these sets of documents, we worked inductively to identify the major themes, arguments and assumptions used in each setting. What problems in education were identified as requiring reform? What causes for these problems were identified? What reasoning or evidence was used to suggest that particular reforms would deal with the identified problems?

England and Wales

During the years of Conservative rule in Britain from 1979 to 1997, many substantive changes were made in the organization of education. This was especially so beginning in 1986, with a constant stream of legislation and policy change affecting schools, colleges, universities and other forms of training. (Lawton, 1994, provides a good review of the main policy documents and bills). The most important single piece of legislation was probably the 1988 Education Reform Act, introduced by Kenneth Baker. This Act involved four main policy shifts for schools. It introduced a National Curriculum and national assessment. It required local authorities (school districts) to pass on almost all the funding they received from government to local schools primarily on a per-capita basis (called LMS, or Local Management of Schools). It also allowed individual schools to opt out of their local authority and become 'Grant-Maintained' - that is, funded directly by the national government and completely self-governing. Another provision, in a separate section of the Act, provided for the London boroughs to leave the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). This was amended during the passsage of the Bill to abolish the ILEA entirely, due primarily to pressure from some key Conservatives.

The tone of discussion in England is well exemplified by Kenneth Baker's speech introducing the Education Reform Act in the House of Commons for second reading on December 1, 1987. Baker's very first words were:

> "Raising the quality of education in our schools is the most important task for this parliament." To do so, "We need to inject a new vitality into that system. It has become producer-dominated. It has not proved sensitive to the demands for change... This Bill will create a new framework, which will raise standards, extend choice and produce a better-educated Britain."

Baker took pains to stress the powerful nature of the proposed reforms. He pointed out that "The proposals, taken together, represent a fundamental change in our education system." He then went on to outline the four major provisions in the Bill that affected schools, as outlined above. Throughout he stressed the importance of decentralization, parental choice and competition as the key lever to raise standards of achievement. "The purpose of the Bill is to secure delegation [of authority] and to widen choice." And speaking of grant-maintained schools: "...standards will rise in all schools as we introduce a competitive spirit into the provision of education".

Finally, in summing up the bill, Baker noted: "The proposals which I have outlined to the House today constitute a major change. I would sum up the Bill's 169 pages in three words - standards, freedom and choice...

"...one cannot improve standards without at the same time increasing choice and freedom"

One of the main Opposition criticisms of the 1988 Act (as of previous and subsequent Tory reforms) was that the changes would increase inequity in the provision of education; that the Conservatives wanted a return to a selective and elitist system in which the children of the well-off received the best education while other children received whatever was left over. The Conservatives repeatedly denied this charge, on the grounds that competition would require all schools to improve their standards and thus benefit all students. However any attention to issues of equity is largely absent in the official statements and pronouncements of the Government, such as in Mr Baker's introduction of the 1988 Act. There is not a word in this speech about issues of equity. Instead, claims about the value of competition for all students come only in response to criticisms.

These same themes of parental choice, diversity of provision, competition, and decentralization of management authority characterize all the main pieces of Conservative legislation in education. For example, in 1992 the government issued a paper entitled "Choice and Diversity: A New Framework for Schools". This paper had an introduction from Prime Minister John Major which said:

> "Our reforms rest on commonsense principles - more parental choice; rigorous testing and external inspection of standards... transfer of responsibility to individual schools and their governors; and, above all, an insistence that every pupil everywhere has the same opportunities through a good common grounding in key subjects." (1992, iii)

The paper went on to outline at length the value of choice in promoting diversity and thereby raising standards, all within the framework of the national curriculum.

Even at the very end of the Conservative period in power, in introducing another education act in 1996 (which was not passed due to the dissolution of the Houes for the 1997 election), then-Minister of Education Gillian Shephard said:

> "This Education Bill is the latest in a succession of education Bills that have, over the past 17 years, transformed our education system. The Bill will continue the drive for reform, by carrying forward the basic principles in wihch we believe... The first and foremost of those principles is the right of parents to choose the education they want for their children, and to be able to choose, wherever possible, from a wide range of different types of good schools. That choice and diversity of schools... have been the strength of Conservative policies since 1979." (11 Nov 1996).

Of course a retrospective statement such as this can and probably does overstate the coherence of policy over time. We are all inclined to underplay in our accounts the importance of circumstance, accident, and even deliberate changes of direction in shaping our actions. Nonetheless, the evidence of official documents, of the autobiographies of several key Conservative figures (including Margaret Thatcher), and even the views of critics all suggest that the Conservatives did have an enduring and fundamental commitment to introducing more parental choice, more decentralization of managerial authority (as distinct from curricular or assessment responsibility) and certainly more competition into the school system. Even national assessment was for the Conservatives closely linked to choice in that assessment results provided a key basis for parents to choose among schools. As Kenneth Baker put it in 1987, "...the point in all this [assessment] is that parents are entitled to know how their child is doing and how their school is doing."

British Conservatives were quite divided on a number of key measures, such as the nature and value of a National Curriculum and the best way to pursue greater diversity in provision (Lawton, 1994). However none of analysts of education reform in Britain have suggested that there was very much internal dispute on the basic matter of increasing parental choice, local management, and diversity of provision.

New Zealand

The main recent reform of education in New Zealand occurred between 1987 and 1991. The initial legislation in 1989 was passed by a Labour Government, and was then amended following the election of the National Government in 1990. So, unlike Britain, governments of two different political parties were involved in the process.

The reform process began when in 1987 the government of Prime Minister David Lange established a commission under the chairmanship of businessman Brian Picot to review educational administration and governance in New Zealand. After Labour's re-election later in 1987, Lange also assumed the Education portfolio and spoke a great deal about the importance of education reform. The Picot Commission reported in May of 1988, and the Government published its response to the report, entitled "Tomorrow's Schools", in August. A year later Lange turned over the Education portfolio to Phil Goff and the Education Act was introduced. The Act was passed in December of 1989. It provided that each school would be largely independent, run by a board consisting mostly of parents and other community members but with staff and student representation, controlling its own resources, and operating according to a

charter outlining the nature and purpose of the school. In fact, the boards were elected in the spring of 1989, before the required legislation had even been introduced in Parliament. The national Ministry of Education would largely be disbanded and separate agencies set up to look after curriculum, assessment, and 'review and audit' of schools. Although Tomorrow's Schools had proposed that teachers' salaries would be funded as part of the block grant to schools, this provision was withdrawn and teachers continued to be paid directly by the national government. Tomorrow's Schools also had a major section on equity issues and on Maori interests in an attempt to ensure that these remained important concerns within the overall reforms.
In his introduction to Tomorrow's Schools, Prime Minister Lange wrote:

> "The Government is certain that the reform it proposes will result in more immediate delivery of resources to schools, more parental and community involvement, and greater teacher responsibility. It will lead to improved learning opportunities for the children of this country. The reformed administration will be sufficiently flexible and responsive to meet the particular needs of Maori education."

In introducing the Bill in parliament on 27 July, 1989, Lange said:

> "This is a historic occasion. A long-overdue reform is being introduced. Since the passage of the Educaiton Boards Act in 1876 and the Education Act in 19877, the structure of education administration has remained basically the same. During the century four working-parties... all called for radical reform, but, down the years successive Governments did not respond to the challenge...
>
> "Charters guarantee standards and fairness. In relation to standards, basic skills must be taught and existing syllabuses followed. In relation to fairness, the Government's policies on equal opportunity and its advocacy of the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi [with the Maori] are advanced."

A couple of months later, on 19 Sept, Lange spoke again on second reading. He began by describing the Bill as "one of a series of legislative measures that brings into force the substantial recommendations of the Picot task force as considered by the Government." However he qualified this.

> "It [the government] never thought for a moment that such a change in administration inevitably would result in some benefit to the quality of learning... In tandem with those administrative changes the Government started to work on the whole question of standards in education."
>
> "The Bill establishes several basic principles. It establishes, first, that the Government has undertaken its responsbility to be the dominant funder and provider of compulsory education in New Zealand... It is a peculiar combination of central authority and local democratic participation...
>
> "The structure and educational administrative philosophy that is outlined in the Bill... ensures that each child in New Zealand will be entitled to the protection of a minimum core of learning and that there will be a chance in the local community to negotiate with the Ministry of Educaiton so that a charter is

> arrived at that preserves that core, but that allows the school to reflect its unique quality and circumstances... Each school should have its particular charater and ethos - and each school is entitled to that - but no child is entitled to suffer from deprivation of education..."
>
> "...it is incubent upon the boards of trustees to ensure that the charters are fulfilled. It is incumbent upon the Minister of Education... to ensure that the resources are available to fulfil the charter."

The Education Review Office would be able to point out where either party had failed in these obligations.

Lange also gave careful attention to funding and equity issues. "There cannot possibly be equity in education by having inequality of funding... It is a matter of balancing the need against the resource... The State has to acknowledge that some things cannot be done..."

In summarizing, Lange had this to say: "I come back to what the Bill is about. It is about a huge change in educational administration. It is about a change that is being welcomed by the community. It is about a change that has caused many good people to work very hard for education. It is about a government that since 1984 has been prepared to spend one-third more in real terms on every primary and secondary school pupil."

In late 1990 the Labour Party was defeated by the conservative National Party, which then introduced, in the spring of 1991, its own Bill to amend the Labour reforms. The new Minister, Dr Lockwood Smith, described them in this fashion.

> "...the Bill is concerned with the consolidation and co-ordination of enrolment policy across primary, intermediate, and secondary schools. Part I makes provision for maximum choice for parents about the State school at which they may enrol their children... The Bill shifts the initiative to adopt an enrolment scheme [as a means of determining who could attend the school] to the board of trustees... It removes the compulsory requirement in a secondary school enrolment scheme that choice between some applicants be determined by a ballot procedure or by a casting of lots."

While this Bill expanded the ability of popular schools to select their own students, nothing was said by the Minister about the virtues of choice, the impact of choice on quality, or any other expression of a view about educational improvement. In fact, Smith's comments stressed the practical nature of the amendments in the face of the real pressures facing some schools.

In June, when the Bill was introduced for second reading, Smith was rather less restrained. The Education Act of 1989, he said, "brought bureaucratic control over our schools to a new level of sophistication - a bureaucratic nirvana... This Bill... gets rid of all of that bureaucratic control. It brings in freedom - freedom of choice for parents and freedom for schools to be more responsive to their communities. ..

"It is important to address the reason that the legislation is important for education. There are at least five reasons, the first of which is freedom of choice. Freedom of choice in education is important to enhance educaitonal standards... The legislation will breed healthy competition among our schools."

Smith then went on to mention the Porter report on competitiveness in New Zealand, and its indication that the country lacked a competitive culture in education. "The legislation will

allow the development of healthy competition - exactly what the Porter project called for - to enable the economy to get going and to allow the spirit of enterprise and competition to start to pervade the culture of our education system so that it can become relevant to this modern competitive international economic environment... The government wants the highest standards in our schools and one way to breed higher standards is healthy competition."

The other three reasons had to do with the impact of the previous enrolment limits and provisions in particular situations, which Smith described as "freedom from stupidity". He used the example of Maori girls who could not attend a Maori girls' school because of enrolment limits as one of his examples to make this point.

Smith concluded: "This Bill is about freedom of choice. It is about schools being responsive to the needs of their communities. It is about healthy competition between schools. It is about common sense... Schools will be encouraged to focus on the kind of education that parents want, thus ensuring higher standards in the important basic subjects."

Examination of the New Zealand documents is interesting especially because analysts of these reforms have described them as being very strongly influenced by a particular set of neo-liberal economic ideas drawn from public choice theory and agency theory (Dale & Jesson, 1992; Boston et al, 1996). Yet these concepts do not appear in the formal record under either the Labour or National governments. Labour's espoused rationale for change was largely pragmatic, and the National government only gradually became more explicitly committed to concepts such as choice and accountability.

Manitoba

The educational reform in Manitoba that is part of our study began with the release in July 1994 of a government policy document, "Renewing Education: New Directions, The Blueprint" followed within a year by two other documents, "Renewing Education: New Directions - The Action Plan (January, 1995) and "Renewing Education: New Directions, A Foundation for Excellence" (June, 1995). Prior to this point the Progressive Conservative government, first elected in 1988, had been relatively inactive in terms of education policy. For example, the recommendations of a public review of education legislation had not been implemented in any substantive way. However in the fall of 1993, a new Education Minister, Clayton Manness, was appointed. Manness had previously been Finance Minister, and was politically powerful as well as having a strong personal interest in education. A rural member of the legislature, he was seen as among the more conservative in the Cabinet.

The documents issued under Manness's direction in 1994 and 1995 outlined six interrelated areas of the government's policy priorities for educational reform which they listed as: Essential Learnings (curriculum frameworks and outcomes); Educational Standards and Evaluation; School Effectiveness; Parental and Community Involvement; Distance Education and Technology; and, Teacher Education. Since 1995 these documents have been followed by dozens of support documents and several amendments to the Public Schools Act and the Educational Administration Act in support of these changes. In addition to changes in curriculum, assessment and other areas, the Conservative government has restrained funding to education, including several years of real reductions in support, and passed legislation that reduced teachers' pay and limited the scope of collective bargaining.

The reform directions were very controversial. School reform was an important issue in the 1995 election in which the Manitoba Teachers' Society campaigned actively against the

Conservative government and its education policies. Key issues included the perception that the government was attempting to: undermine teachers' professional autonomy; reduce teachers' salaries and bargaining powers; as well as the educational merit of standards testing and the publishing of school-by-school standards examination results.

In Manitoba school reform has been consistently cast in the language of "renewal" and "revitalization". Tabling the first "New Directions" document in the Legislature in 1994, the Education Minister referred to the document as "the framework for the renewal of the education system", a perspective repeated in the next policy document "Renewing Education: New Directions, The Action Plan" which stated:

> Educational renewal in Manitoba seeks to ensure that effective education strategies are used consistently and appropriately across the system and that all students have the opportunity to achieve success in school. Educational renewal represents the Government's commitment to revitalize the public education system for current and future generations of students (p.4).

While the language of renewal and revitalization carries with it some sense of critique of the existing system and its teachers and administrators, within the official rhetoric of school reform in Manitoba this criticism was decidedly muted. In 1996, Education Minister Linda MacIntosh, when introducing an amendment to the Public Schools Act designed to increase parental choice over their children's schooling and legislating parental rights of student information, would go as far as to frame this legislation as part of the government's commitment to "restore public confidence in the public education system", but even here she stops short of an open criticism of teachers.

Rather than school reform being presented as a governmental attack on the shortcomings of the existing system it was instead framed as a timely response to a changing world in which matters of ideology are left unstated. Thus, introducing legislation in support of parent advisory councils, Minister Clayton Manness stated;

> As Minister I am very proud of Manitoba's education system. It is innovative, progressive and constantly evolving to meet the needs of the community. Our education system is in fact the cornerstone of our entire social structure. But even as I am proud of the system, I am also aware of its evolving nature and issues confronting it. Times change and the system must reflect that reality. (December 19th, 1994).

Prominent within the presentation of a new societal and educational reality in Manitoba were the themes of "globalization", "fiscal restraint", "parental involvement", "parental choice", and "consultation", which provided a justification for many of the reform initiatives.

The government's Speech from the Throne in November 1992, proceeding the official launching of New Directions initiatives in education by some eighteen months, nonetheless set the stage for the government's priority in terms of economic renewal and the central role that education and training was to play in that plan. The speech stated dramatically:

> The winds of change are sweeping the globe. Walls and boundaries that have traditionally defined nations, international trade, national economies and individual life styles are tumbling down. This revolutionary process is affecting every continent and touching virtually every nation and every community.

The government's response was to present a program of "economic renewal" based on an "ability to control taxes and create an internationally competitive climate for investment as sustainable growth". In this program education and training were seen as "the keys that unlock a world of opportunity and a future of economic growth and prosperity". Consistent with this theme, the Minister of Education in tabling the Renewing Education: New Directions; The Blueprint for Action (1994) stated:

> Building a secure future for our children and our province requires a solid education. We need to do everything possible to ensure that our children are prepared to be successful in today's competitive world. (July 5th, 1994, p.5410).

Fiscal retraint was also prominent as a theme in government communications. In 1994 Manness, newly moved from Minister of Finance to Minister of Education, quickly introduced the school reform initiatives that had been developed under previous Ministers. In his opening statement in the debate of the Education Estimates on May 9th, 1994 he stated:: "I want the record to show that my No. 1 priority, having come into the ministry, is the reform of education", and he continued:

> The reality is, the government of Manitoba and indeed governments across the land are going to have to do reform and a lot of changes that I think most of us around this table would agree to; they are going to have to do that in the context of constraint.

As both federal and provincial governments made the elimination of large budget deficits without increases in taxation the focus of their economic policies, the Manitoba government did indeed push forward with its reform initiatives at the same time that annual funding increases for public school education, where they occurred, did not keep pace with inflation.

Increased parental involvement in education and increased parental choice in decisions related to their children's schooling remain constant themes in Manitoba's New Directions reform - although the degree of involvement countenanced is quite limited and the additional amounts of choice legislated beyond what already existed relatively small. In introducing into the Legislature the document, "Renewing Education: New Directions, A Blueprint for Action" Manness said:

> Together, parents and communities play a vital role in education. Parents, as a child's first teacher, establish the foundation for lifelong learning in their children. Many parents and community members want to be more involved in shared decision making about educational programming and other matters. Actions are required to enable parents to have a more significant role as educational partners and to create ways for all parents to become involved in their children's schools and schooling. Therefore, we will require schools to establish advisory councils for school leadership comprised of parents and community members as requested by those same parents ... We will enable parental choice, within limits, in selecting the public school best suited to their child's learning requirements in order to increase parental choice within the public school system [Hansard, July 5th, 1995, p. 4510]

The language of accountability and the significance of standards testing and reporting to parents as a basis for choice are both present, but accountability is primarily presented as a shared responsibility and not simply a mechanism for monitoring and controlling teachers. Most specifically, in speaking to an amendment to the Educational Administration Act designed to expand upon and clarify the powers of the Minister of Education and Training, including the power to prescribe assessment and reporting methods and procedures (Hansard, May 30th, 1996), the Minister argued:

> Setting educational standards and policies related to school achievement and ensuring that information on students' achievement is available to facilitate improvement through the cooperative efforts of students, parents and educators will indeed reinforce the importance of shared responsibility and accountability amongst the partners.

Alberta

In Alberta the major reforms of interest to this study took place in 1994, although, as in the other setting, prior events helped shape the way the process unfolded. For example, the Alberta government had for years had a very active policy orientation in education, and the Department of Education had been moving steadily towards an operation based on a public plan and set of goals. The decisive event in Alberta, however, was the election by the governing Conservative party of a new leader and Premier, Ralph Klein, in the summer of 1993, and Klein's emphasis on taking very strong action to reduce the provincial deficit by cutting spending.

In January of 1994, Premier Klein announced a general reduction in government spending, including a four-year reduction target for education of 12.4%, the lowest of the major spending departments. The following week, Education Minister Halvar C. Jonson announced plans for a major restructuring of the education system including a substantial reduction in the number of school boards, parental choice of schools, charter schools, 100% funding of education by the provincial government, and increased provincial authority over many of the actions of school boards coupled with the move of other responsibilities from boards to individual schools. These proposals were published the following month as part of the Department of Education three year business plan, *Key Directions for Education in Alberta*. Some of these measures, especially those moving powers away from school boards, were softened before Bill 19 was passed in May of 1994.

The rationale for the reform given by Alberta government leaders had very little to say about problems of education and did not assume that there was a clear path to reform. Although parent choice and charter schools were both part of the reform, they were hardly mentioned in the debate in the Legislature, and it appeared at one point that Premier Klein did not really know what charter schools were (Hansard, April 26, 1994). In responding to questions about the Bill, Premier Klein indicated its purpose as:

> ...quite simply the Minister of Education has said on a number of occasions quite clearly that the frontline attack relative to education is on the fundamental administration of the system, and basically we want the dollars to follow the students into the classroom so they can get good quality education (Question period, Feb 14, 1994).

Minister Jonson took a similar line, saying that the Bill was about

> ...direction from the top, strong direction in terms of standards and in terms of core curriculum but also that the maximum flexibility is left at the delivery point, the school level, the student level, the community level to meet those standards, to meet those goals in the most effective and locally based way possible. (March 30, 1994, Committee of Supply)

And again, a few weeks later, he said that the changes were "designed to focus resources on students in the classroom, to ensure more decision-making at the school level, to lower administrative costs, and to put into place a fair system of funding education" (April 12, 1994). Issues of financing and governance were seen as primary, as opposed to issues of curriculum and assessment.

Analysis

We ask two main questions in thinking about the significance of our data. The first has to do with the extent to which these various reform programs can be seen as sharing a common language and possibly a common way of thinking as reflected in that language. The second concerns the role of official discourse in education reform.

On the first point, at a general level there are many commonalities. All the jurisdictions used some of the same symbolic language - words such as competition, choice, excellence and accountability recur in all the settings.

Beyond this general level, there are clearly very significant differences in the official language of education reform in these settings. In England the Tory government employed a relatively consistent language emphasizing choice, diversity and competitions as a way of improving standards within a national curriculum framework. Although one should not overstate the degree of consistency in a set of reforms that lasted well over a decade, it is clear that key elements of the Conservative program, and especially an emphasis on market-like strategies coupled with assessment and inspection, were indeed an ongoing part of the package from beginning to end. Certainly Ministers spoke of them in such terms through the period under study.

In New Zealand, although the reforms are generally seen as being part of a broader effort to impose neo-liberal economic concepts, the legislation itself and the parliamentary debate have little or nothing to say on this score and the justification used was, in the case of Labour, primarily one of 'time for a change'. The language of the National Party made much greater use of concepts of economic competitiveness and anti-bureaucracy.

In the two Canadian provinces, on the other hand, the reforms were justified almost entirely on supposedly commonsense education grounds within a larger government agenda of limiting or reducing public spending. What is striking in these provinces is the lack of rationale for the reforms either in debates in legislatures or in official documents. There is much more focus on what will be done and how it will happen than on why.

We draw a distinction here between partisanship and differences of principle. In every parliamentary setting there will be a high level of partisanship between government and opposition. However this is a different matter from a difference of view based on clearly

articulated values. In Alberta, for example, the Liberal opposition took every opportunity to attack the Klein government's proposals, but always on matters of process and degree rather than on substance. The debate was quite partisan but not very ideological. In the other three settings, the opposition placed more emphasis on ideological differences between them and the government.

Despite these differences, all governments did indeed speak of their reforms as being very important or significant, even in historical terms. This was perhaps especially so in England and New Zealand, where governments took pride in a change of historic proportions. But both the Alberta and Manitoba governments also claimed that the changes they were making were of considerable importance in responding to changing conditions and needs.

Although expenditures on education were reduced in all four settings, there was literally no mention of this agenda in either England or New Zealand. David Lange took pride in mentioning increases in spending for education when introducing the Education Act in 1989. In Alberta, reductions in funding were a central feature of the reform process, and so stated from the beginning. In Manitoba reductions in spending were very real, but were more a contextual element than a central part in the justification for reform.

Economic competitiveness was mentioned in all four jurisidictions as an important rationale for reform. Every government spoke about the vital importance of a well educated workforce and mentioned specifically the demands for increased skills as part of maintaining prosperity, although the term 'globalization' was not frequently used.

Each government claimed that it was acting in the interests of 'the people' as an entity. However the Conservative government in England was the most pugnacious in openly dismissing the positions of its opponents and in that sense the most willing to admit that some people disagreed with its course of action. In New Zealand under Labour and in the two Canadian provinces the governments took the view that they were acting on a consensus view - in Alberta supported by a process of consultation that had just been completed. The English government was least inclined, it appears, to official consultation processes

Politics and rhetoric

Our data offer support for the views about political language advanced by Edelman, Stone and others. In each jurisdiction language is being used to evoke a particular view of the situation which has the effect of making the policies being adopted by government seem reasonable, normal, even inevitable. The idea of options, of there being a range of different possibilities from which different choices might be made, is almost entirely absent. Political discourse seems to demand certainty as a political management device. The frames of explanation for government actions are not accidental, and in fact most of the speeches and documents we have cited were the result of sustained attention from politicians and civil servants.

Clearly this kind of linguistic legitimation can take place in different ways depending on each political context. In England the language of crisis was invoked to justify dramatic change. In New Zealand, Prime Minister Lange spoke of a needed modernization in the governance of education. In Manitoba the need to respond to global economic forces as well as to parental aspirations were key factors cited, while in Alberta the need for greater efficiency through devolution was a prime explanation.

While much of the discussion of recent education reform in these settings is framed in terms of ideological justification and political conflict, in three of the four settings the official record is rather different. Only in England do we find a government that admits - indeed, avows - at every opportunity the role that its ideological views played in the formation of its policies and legislation. In New Zealand, Alberta and Manitoba the documentary record, whether in white papers, legislation itself or parliamentary debate, rarely provides a clearly articulated rationale for reform.

We do not suggest that these data mean that analyses that focus on ideological positions are misplaced. There are many reasons why white papers, legislation and debate might fail to reveal a clear stance on matters of principle and value. A number of these were articulated in the literature review earlier in this paper; the views of politics embodied in the work of Edelman, Stone, Lindblom and others would suggest that such debate would often eschew carefully reasoned argument in favour of easy rhetoric and the language of symbols. In some political settings governments might wish to hide their real motives or agenda. Members of the government or legislature might not themselves be aware of the intellectual premises behind their actions. The real political action might be held to be occurring elsewhere, so that parliament was of relatively little interest. The much more polemical debate over education policy in the media and other parts of the public sphere in each setting - also a subject for another paper - suggests that both proponents and opponents of reform saw the official record as only part of the struggle, and perhaps not the key one.

Language is vitally important to politics, in education as in other fields. Political debate may revolve around key words even if these are not at the centre of what is happening in schools. In this sense, too, the analysis offered by Edelman and others is important.

Yet it is also vital to remember that behind all the debate are real actions with real consequences. Neither the actions nor the consequences may be entirely consistent with the rhetoric, but they do have impacts on the lives of students, parents and educators. Whatever the espoused rationale for the introduction of testing and the public reporting of results, such actions do changes how teachers and students experience their education. Whatever the grounds for the creation of school choice plans, when implemented such plans to indeed alter what schools do (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995; Vincent, 1996; Whitty & Power, 1997). In this sense an analysis that focuses on language and ignores real consequences may be divert attention from the important realities of life in schools for students and teachers.

About 8600 words of text

Notes

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